

SIGHT AND INSIGHT

OF INDIAN ART SYMBOLS

Decor of the Maharashtra Pavilion and the Pancha-Ganga
at the International Tourist Fair, Bombay, 1967

by M. R. ACHAREKAR

INTRODUCTION

India, the land of wonders, attracted attention of men from different parts of the ancient world. They came and were received with open arms with the proverbial Indian hospitality. They saw a new world of art and architecture, men and matters, pomp and pageantry. And they were conquered by the beatitude of the spiritual clan of the land.

Indian art has been all the while closely integrated with the life and living. Indian concepts of cosmology and metaphysics were simplified for the ordinary intelligence through the anthropomorphic and symbolic representations of their myths and legends. Even today this rich heritage is strong and continuous. Both the urban and the rural life reflects this amalgam of the traditional past and the new explorations of the present.

Aryans were never narrowly realistic. Their art since the beginning was ideoplastic with a strain of mysticism on the one side and the romantic-realism on the other. Even the earliest hymns from the Rig Veda and the early sculptural works of the Mauryans prove the fact.

The Panch-Ganga :

The racial memory of their riverine civilisation was retained and carried over in their myths and legends. The numbers 3, 5, or 7 had a mystic significance to man all over the world. The Pancha-Ganga or the Sapta-Sindu as a symbol of the river goddess of peace and plenty is a projection of such a memory. Though the ancient rivers have changed their courses and names, the Indian mind at different times and places has identified the local rivers with this proto-typal symbol with diverse numbers and names. The Ganga, Narmada, Godavari, Kaveri and Yamuna—in fact all rivers are hallowed in their memory.

Sheshashayin Vishnu :

The concept that the primordial matter was enformed by Brahma, *the Creator*, and left to Vishnu to preserve and to fulfil is vividly represented by Vishnu reclining on the great serpent the Shesha (the Remainder i.e. what is left behind after the creation). Shesha is also Ananta (Endless) and rises with its myriad coils out of the abysmal water beyond Time and Space in the process of being and becoming.

Trimurti :

This monumental piece of sculpture from the island of Elephanta, near Bombay, with its naturalistic iconography is sufficiently enlivened and romanticised to convey a deeper, philosophic cosmological truth about the origin, preservation and the final disintegration of the Universe. There is Shiva, the Destroyer in his pristine *Ugra-Roopa* (Fearsome Mien) joined to Vishnu the Shant, the Peaceful, and Preserver of the cosmic balance along with Brahma, the self-same Creator—the epitome of being and becoming. However, these esoteric concepts are presented with great aesthetic sensibility and apart from the literary content, this is one of the finest masterpieces rightly famed for its expressive beauty and monumental volume, evocating a deep sense of sublime.

Heavenly Deities :

Flying Gandharvas participating in divine and worldly celebrations like victory, coronation and nuptials ; Apsaras (the celestial dancers) coming down to further the cause of gods ; Ravana, the great king and a devotee of Shiva, shaking Kailasa prove that Hindu deities were not merely the denizens of the sky aloof from the race of man but were much too much concerned and embroiled with human affairs. This made Hindu mythology human enough within Law of Karma—the Universal Dynamics of Motion.

Kailasa Pillar :

Kailasa temple at Ellora stands out as the supreme monument to the lofty imagination of Indian sculptors. The grand harmonics of its architectural space and the sculptural mass are the wonders of creative construction. Carved out of the solid rock from the top downward, it presents a wondrous sight of the Hindu Pantheon centered round Shiva, the Lord of the Universe.

Flora and Fauna :

The Aryans recognised very early the innate biological relationship between the different species of life. The immortal gods and the mortal men, divine spirits and earthly flora and fauna were the part of the original matter involved in the cycle of life. No wonder birds like Garuda and peacock, animals like the elephant, lion, bull and the horse were chosen as vehicles of different deities. Hence, India has given to the world some of the outstanding masterpieces of animal studies.

Symbols and Motifs :

The creative vision of the ancient seers is codified in such symbols and motifs of Indian art. This vision spread all over the country from North to South and from East to West and even to the other parts of the then known world. In spite of the wide diversities the whole mass of Indian people was firmly welded in a unity of common ideology and a common way of life. One is astounded in the presence of such significant motifs and symbols. Consequently, philosophy in India was not a profession of the few but way of life of the many and art was not a handmaid of religion but an equal partner in enriching the spiritual as well as the worldly life of man.

M. R. Acharekar who visualised the decor of the Maharashtra Pavilion in the International Tourist Fair, held in Bombay, 1967, has aptly selected and used some of the masterpieces of Indian art. In the study of our arts either of the past or present one is pleasantly surprised to find that in spite of the regional variations, there is an under-lying, pronounced unity. Though the motifs like 'Peacock' come from the Vishrambag Wada, Poona, and the balconies, arches and columns from the architecture of Maratha period, all have a deep Indian feeling. This collection of the masterly renderings in pencil by M. R. Acharekar is the artistic memento of the Fair.

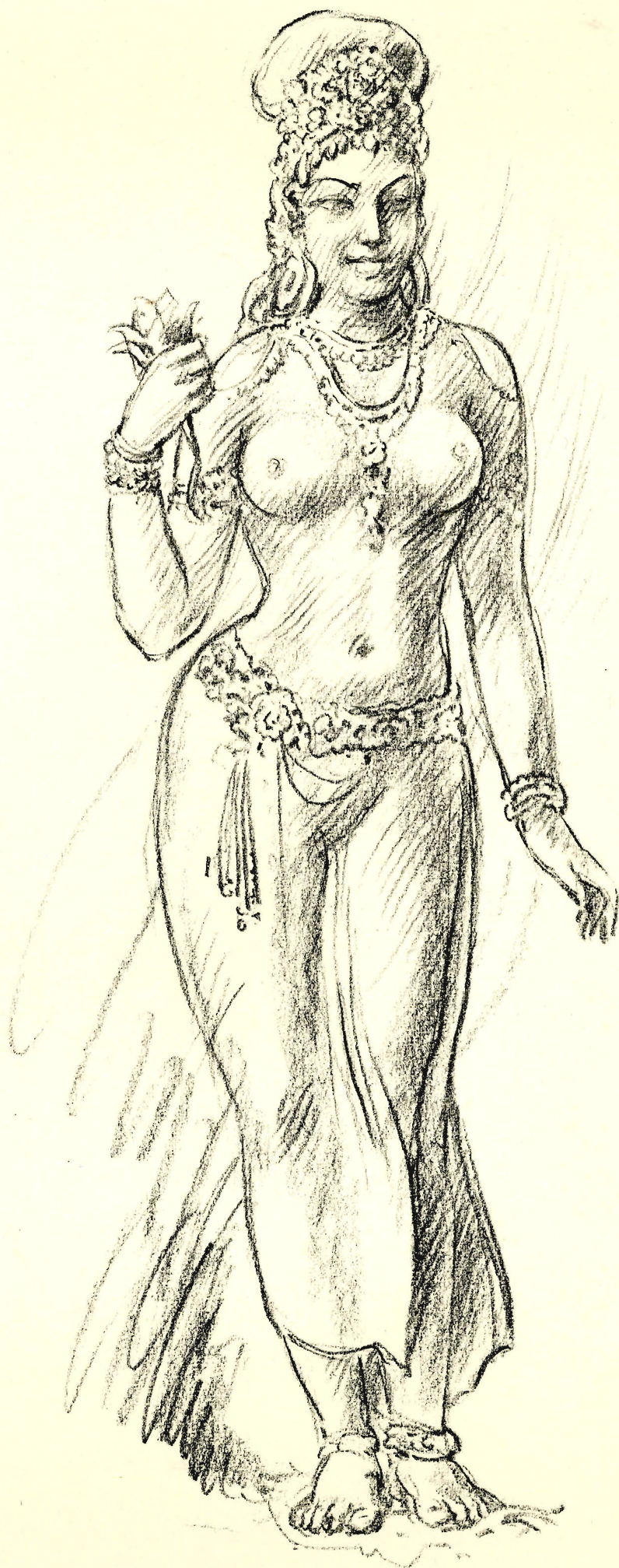
October 24, 1967.

V. R. A.

BOMBAY.

PLATES

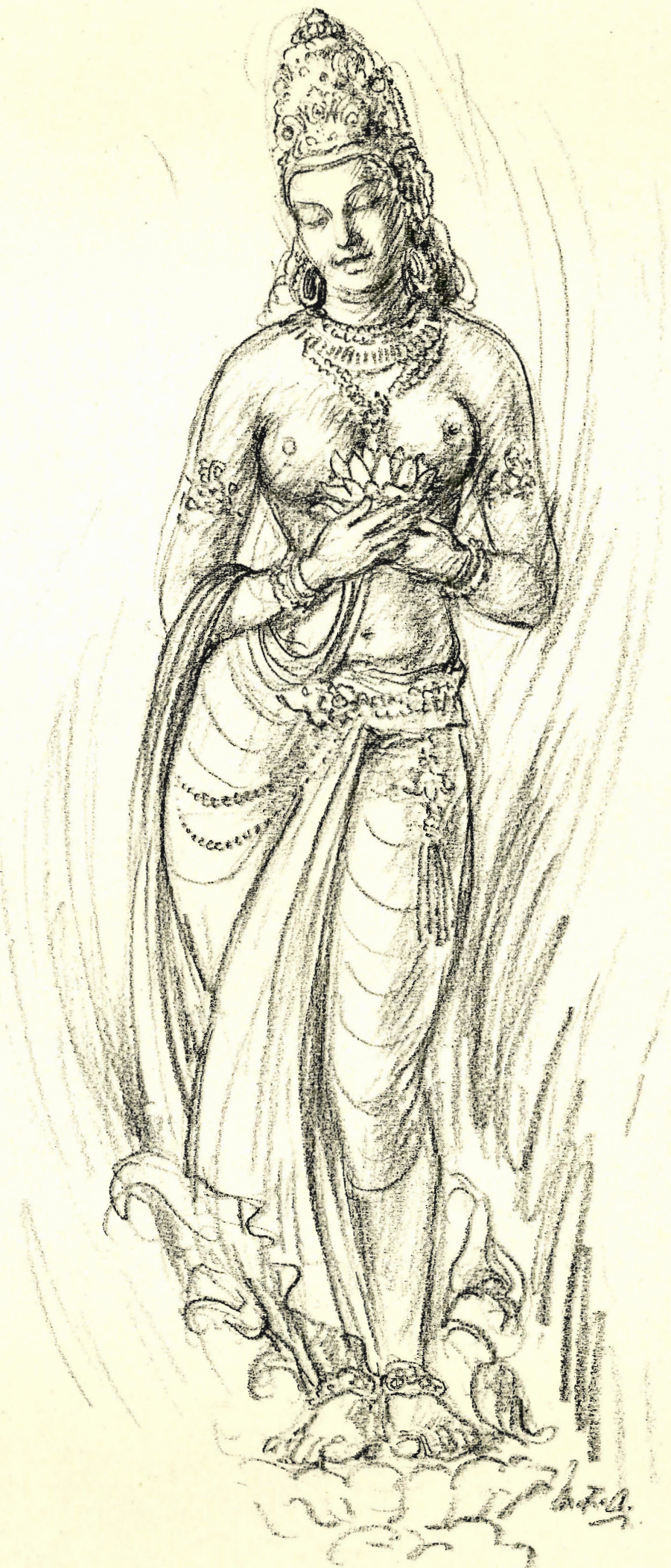
1. The River Ganga.
2. The River Narmada.
3. The River Godavari.
4. The River Kaveri.
5. The River Yamuna.
6. The Five Rivers.
7. Top View of the Five Rivers.
8. Sheshashayin Vishnu.
9. Vishnu—A full view.
10. Shiva as Nataraj.
11. Shiva performing Tandav.
12. Flying Gandharvas.
13. Flying Gandharvas.
14. Deepamala.
15. Maharashtra Pavilion.
16. Ganesha.
17. Trimurti.
18. A Mural Decor.
19. Kailasa Pillar at the Centre of the Pavilion.
20. "Peacock".



1. The River Ganga.



2. The River Narmada.



3. The River Godavari.



4. The River Kaveri.



5. The River Yamuna.



6. The Five Rivers.

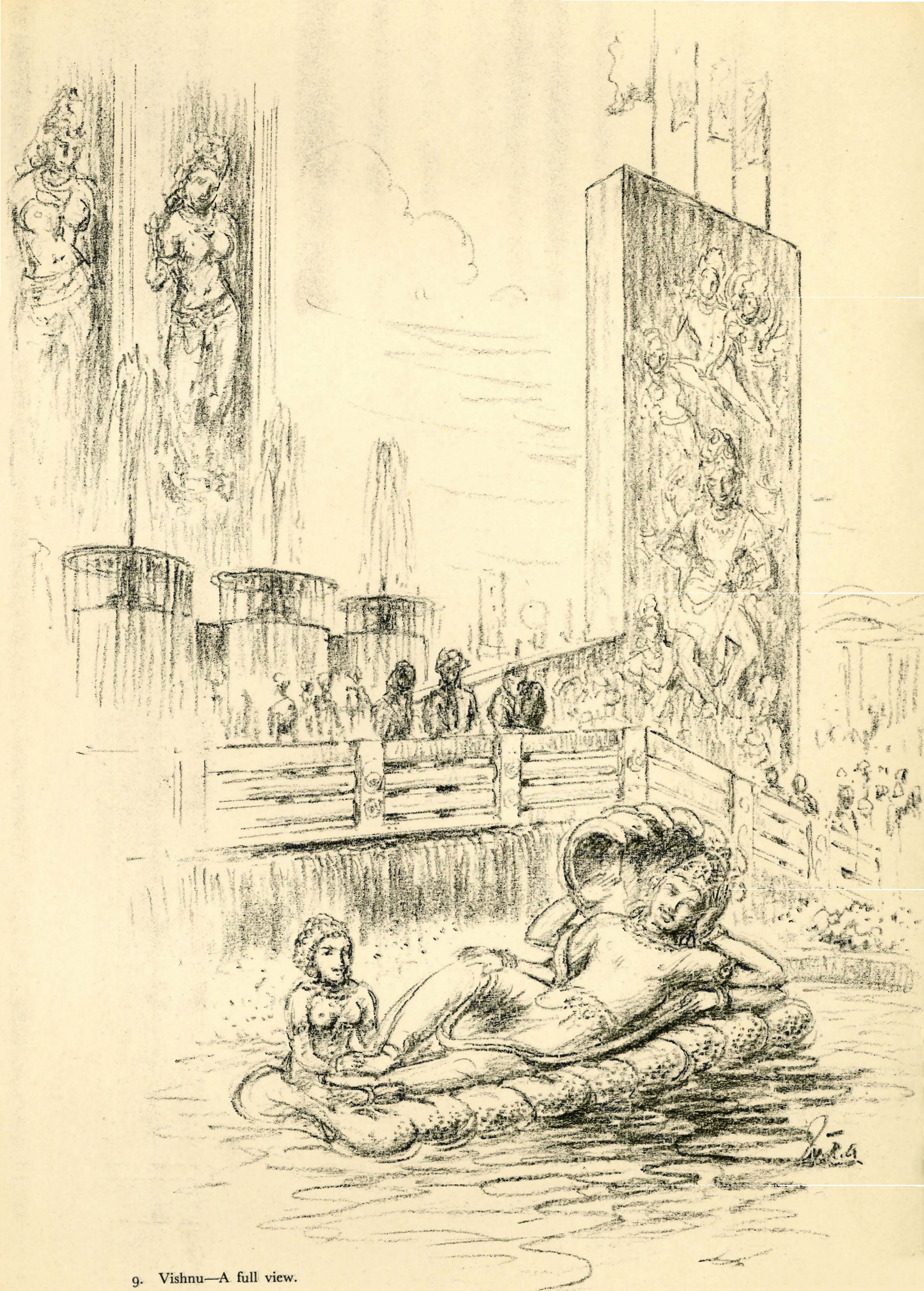
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7. Top View of the Five Rivers.



8. Sheshashayin Vishnu.



9. Vishnu—A full view.



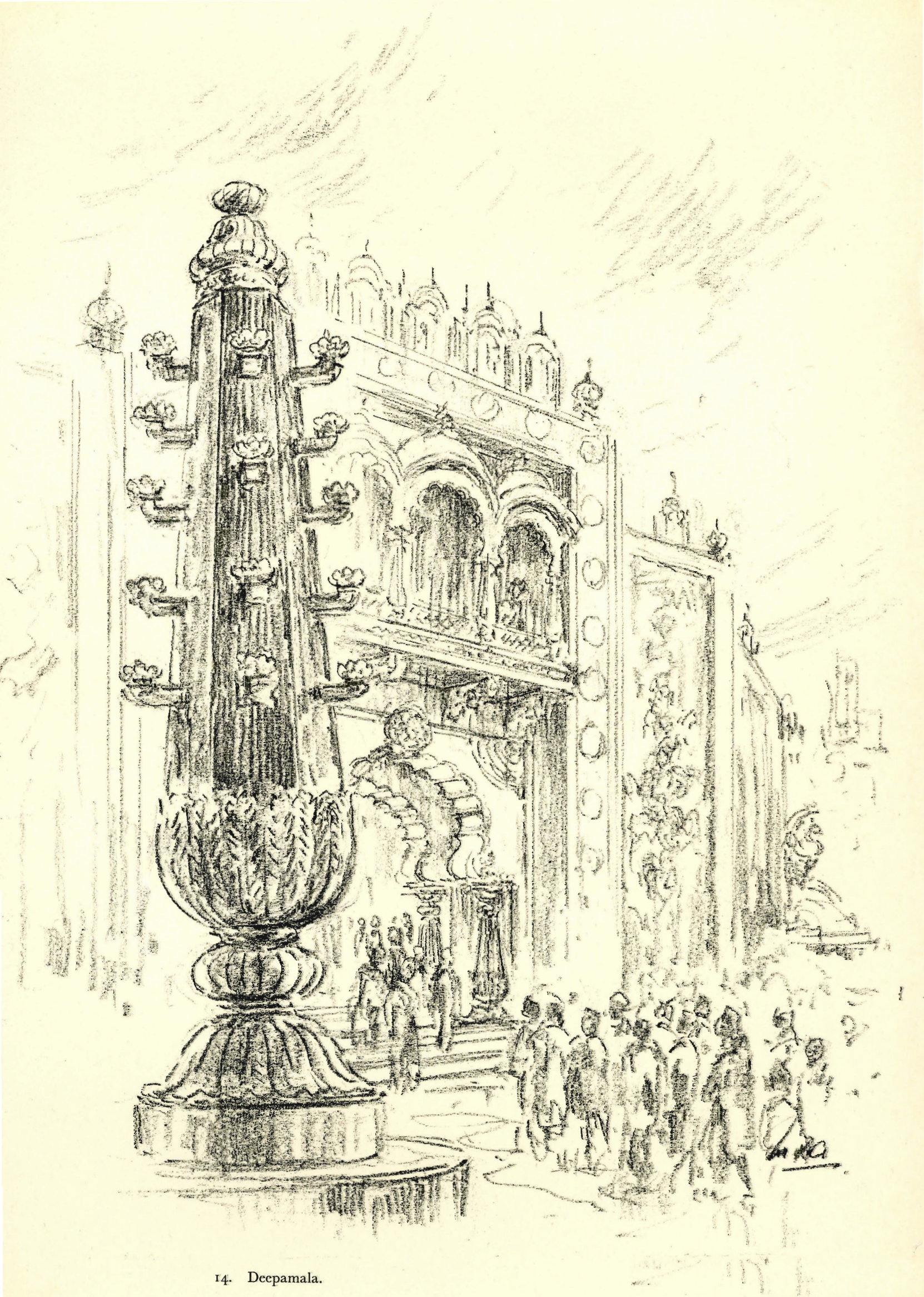
10. Shiva as Nataraj.

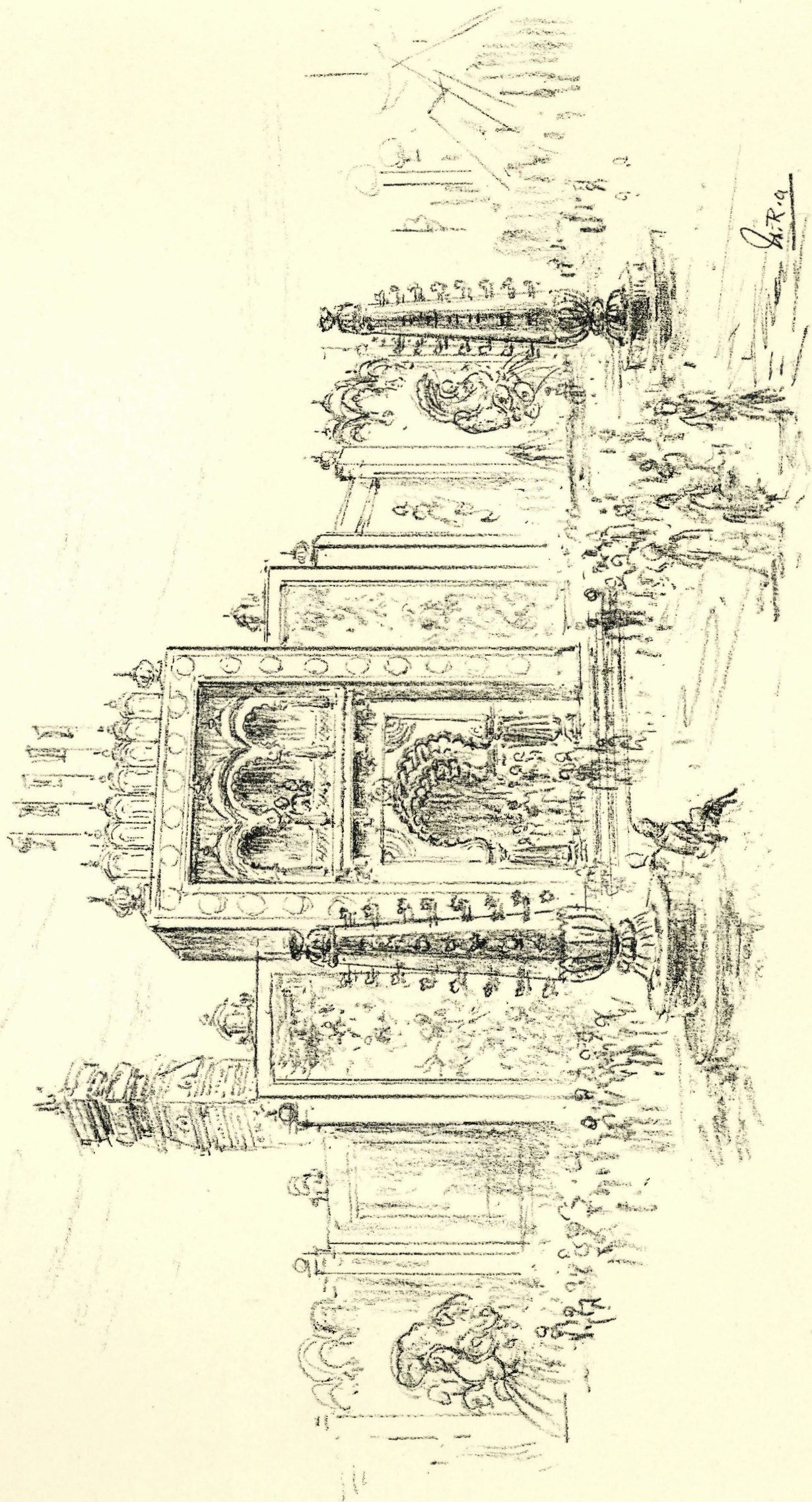


11. Shiva performing Tandav.

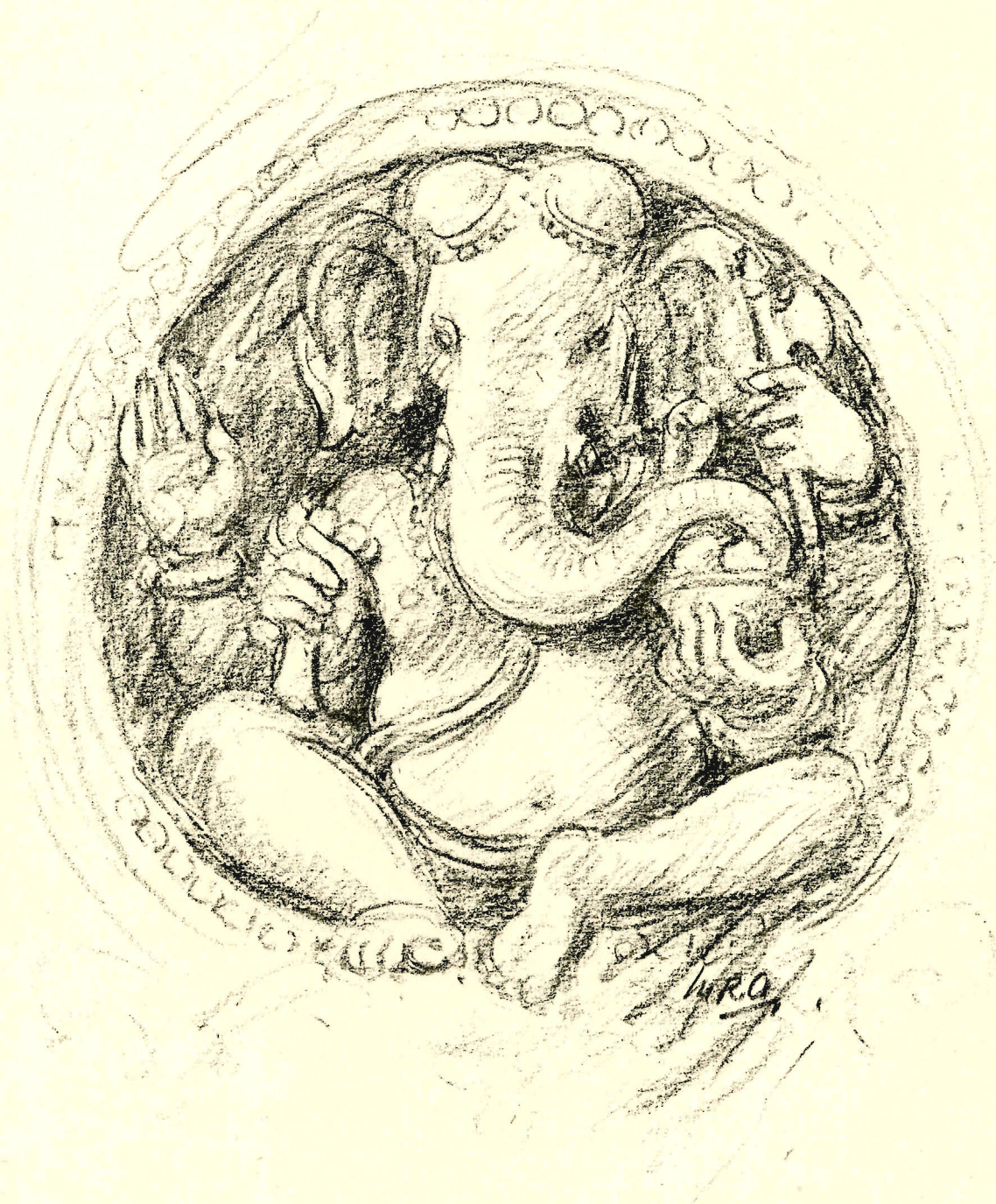




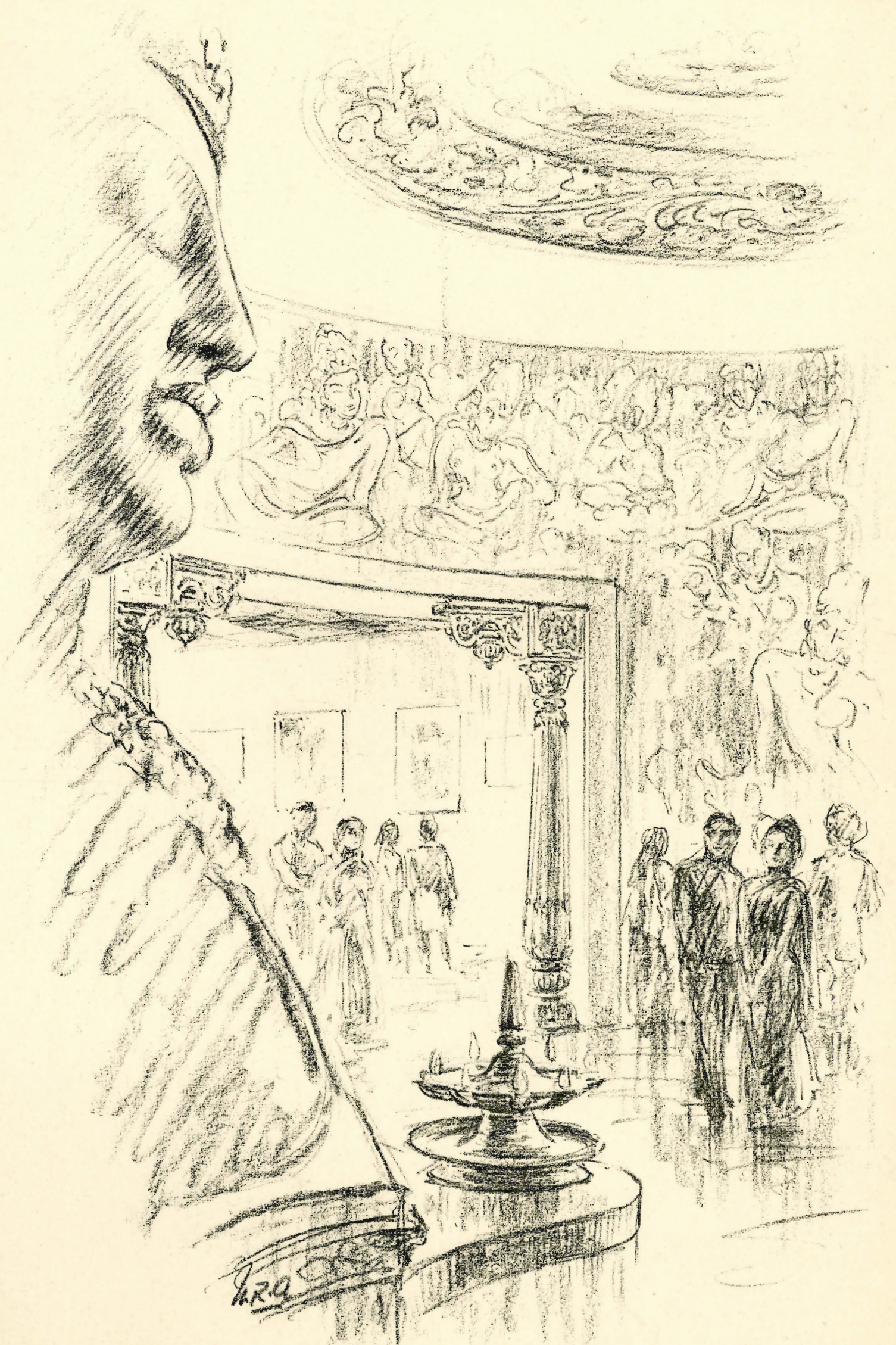


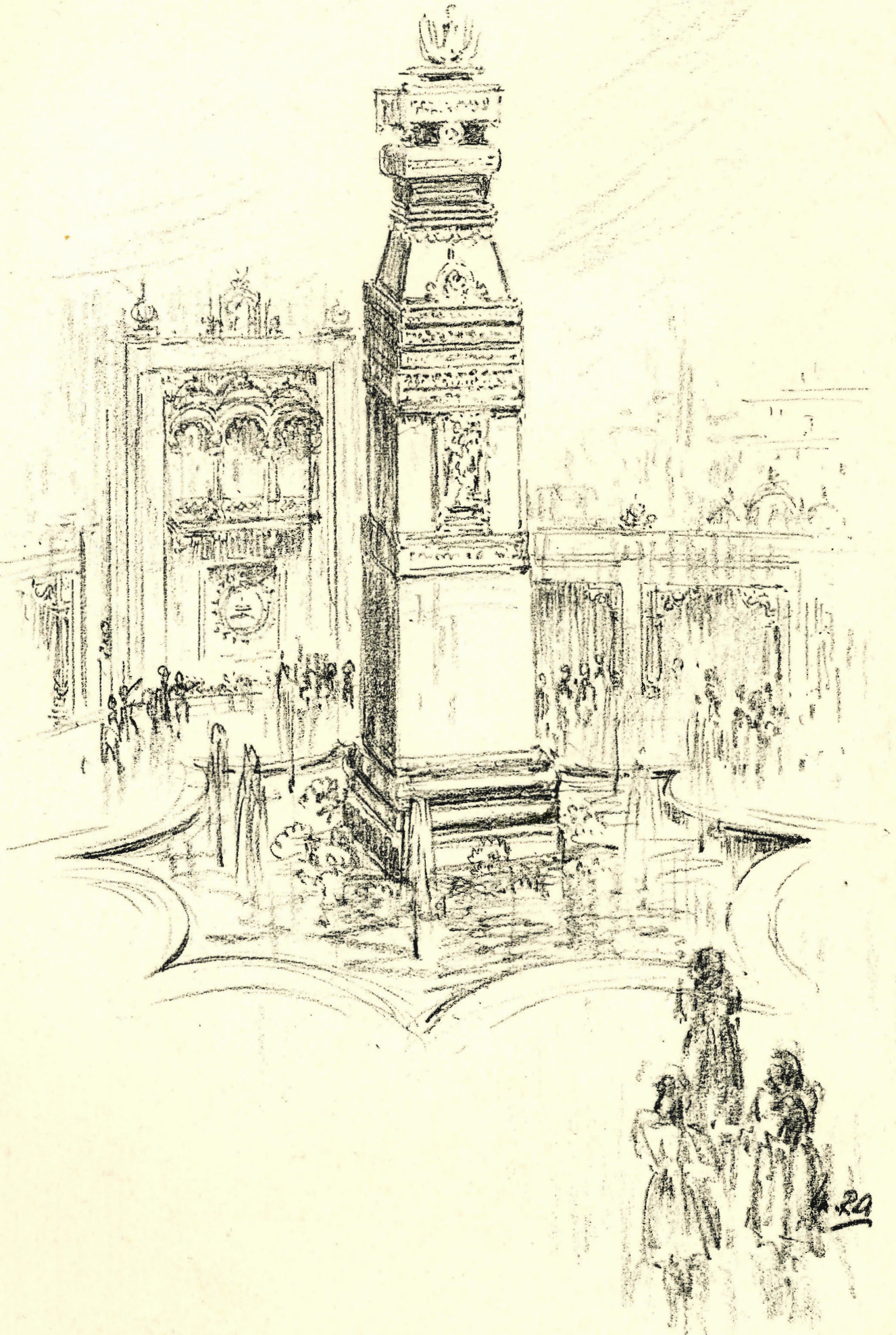


15. Maharashtra Pavilion.









19. Kailasa Pillar at the Centre of the Pavilion.

